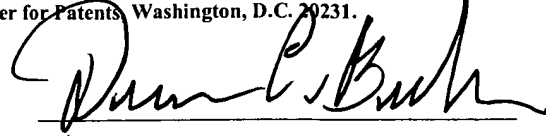


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Dean C. Brehm



**APPLICATION FOR
UNITED STATES LETTERS PATENT**

FOR

A Method and Apparatus for

An Ocean Bottom Seismic Acquisition Technique

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BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to a system and method for deployment of seismic sensors and in particular to the deployment and retrieval of self-propelled, autonomous seismic sensors in an ocean environment.

Description of the Related Art

Historically, ocean bottom seismic data acquisition sensor packaging and deployment has taken the form of either self-contained instruments dropped in the water or sensor cables streamed behind a surface support ship. Typically, self-contained seismic instruments are dropped off the back of a surface support ship where they descend under the influence of their own negative buoyancy to drift down through a water column until they contact the sea-floor. This drop and drift system is imprecise and potentially leaves seismic survey areas uncovered. Typically, the seismic instruments have been deployed from the back of a surface support ship or vessel. Alternatively, surface towing vessels have been used for surface support and deployment of ocean bottom cables (OBC) which are dragged or draped over a seabed. In other instances, seismic cables and instruments have been deployed with the aid of remotely controlled vehicles. This remotely controlled procedure is limited by the operational speed and capacity of remotely operated deployment vehicles. Moreover, conventional ship borne seismic cable deployment systems are limited in the number of cables that they feasibly can deploy and accurately control during seismic operations. At a certain point, the number of cables in the water becomes unwieldy. Thus, there is a need for a system that avoids the problems of the prior art.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides self-propelled remotely controlled instruments or multi-component ocean bottom seismometers (MOBS) that are capable of swimming to a designated location on the sea floor, under their own power, and attaching themselves to the sea floor to attain optimal coupling and enhanced multi-component seismic recordings. After completing a survey, the MOBS store the seismic recordings internally and return to a designated location near the sea surface for retrieval by a support vessel or swimming to another sea bottom location for another seismic survey.

The MOBS instruments are self-propelled. The MOBS are guided by a sea-surface and seafloor navigational system, which is well known in the art. A surface vessel communicates with precisely located seafloor navigation buoys and the MOBS to determine the distance between the MOBS, the navigation buoys and the desired location to calculate iterative location commands which are communicated to each MOBS to enable precise navigation commands to steer the MOBS to its desired location. A mechanical system of fins is used to propel the MOBS instruments through a water column. Upon arrival at the ocean bottom, the fins are used to dig into the ocean bottom to improve coupling of the MOBS instruments to the sea floor. As described herein, the ability to affix themselves to the sea floor, in the manner outlined below, provides better coupling of the MOBS instrument seismometer package than has previously been achieved using existing ocean bottom systems. Better coupling provides improved vector fidelity in associated seismic recordings, which is an important enhancing factor in

subsequent processing and analysis of shear wave reflection data gathered by the MOBS instruments.

Further, given a sufficient redundancy of the MOBS instruments, an entire three-dimensional seismic recording geometry can be laid out precisely on the sea floor in a relatively short period of time. The present invention deploys the MOBS with minimal logistic and economic cost incurred for support and deployment of the MOBS instruments. Finally, the present invention provides capability for use in areas of extreme water depth and strong tidal currents where convention seismic survey techniques have been less effective.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

Figure 1 is a top view of a MOBS instrument of the present invention;

Figure 2 is a side view of a MOBS instrument of the present invention;

Figure 3 is a schematic top cross sectional view of a MOBS instruments according to the present invention;

Figure 3A is a side cross sectional view of the preferred embodiment of the present invention showing that the mass is equally distributed about the vertical axis of the body so that there is no preferred direction;

Figure 4 is an illustration of a navigation system for the MOBS instrument of the present invention.

Figures 5 and 6 illustrate the preferred propulsion system of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION OF A PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Turning now to **Figure 1** and **Figure 2**, the MOBS 10 provided by the present invention is preferably discoid in shape with a flat bottom 16 and a curved upper surface 18. Any hydrodynamically efficient body shape, however, will work for the present invention. As shown in **Figure 3**, the MOBS is schematically compartmentalized into a geophone housing 30, recording housing 32, navigation housing 34, power unit 36, control unit 38, propulsion control unit 40, buoyancy control unit 41 and four propulsion units or fins distributed symmetrically about the geophone frame. **Figure 3A** is a side view of the preferred embodiment of the present invention showing that the mass of each MOBS compartment shown schematically in **Figure 3**, is equally distributed about the vertical axis of the body or distributed in a balanced fashion so that there is no preferred direction. The preferred dimensions of the instrument are approximately 10.0 x 10.0 x 3.0 inches shown by dimension arrows 26, 27 and 29 respectively, as shown in **Figures 1** and **2**. These dimensions however can be adapted to enhance performance under varying water conditions. Larger dimensions may be preferred for more stability in deeper water and stronger currents, and smaller dimensions may be more suitable for alternate environments, where additional mobility is desired, such as in shallow lakes or even in a wellbore.

Any number of MOBS instruments can be deployed at one time from a survey vessel or surface support ship. As shown in **Figure 4**, the MOBS are independently controlled so that they can propel themselves or swim using fins **14**. The MOBS swim in formation or individually to and from the sea floor and swim to return to a surface support vessel without interfering with each other. A flight control system **49** is located on the surface support ship which tracks each MOBS instrument and directs each MOBS individually to prevent collisions. The flight control system directs each MOBS to the surface for retrieval by a surface support ship or in swimming to a new survey location after a completed survey. The surface support vessel navigation system communicates with each MOBS and a sea floor navigation system via acoustic transponders to locate each MOBS and direct it to the desired location. The MOBS are identifiable by virtue of unique digital interrogation addresses which are communicated between the surface support ship and each MOBS. The surface support ship locates and directs each individual MOBS controlling each MOBS descent and ascent to and from the ocean floor, much like an air traffic controller directs the landing and take off of multiple aircraft. In an alternative embodiment, two surface support vessels communicates directly with each MOBS and eliminates the sea floor transponder.

The MOBS can be deployed from the surface ship into the water by any appropriate means including by hand or from a cage or some other mechanical device. Once deployed, each MOBS responds to the surface ship and sea floor transponder array via an acoustic pulse. The MOBS may also relay its current X, Y, Z position and vertical vector to the surface support vessel via acoustic pulses or any other wireless medium.

The surface support ship then sends an instruction to each MOBS such that each MOBS alters its course via successive iterations to converge on its pre-determined location on the ocean floor. MOBS motion and orientation within the water column is controlled by the relative actions of each independent MOBS propulsion unit.

Having propelled the MOBS to the correct X, Y, and Z position, the propulsion fins 14 transform to coupling and orientation units. The fins dig into the sea floor to enhance coupling of the MOBS to the sea floor. On instruction from the surface support ship the coupling units oscillate and dig into the ocean floor to mechanically secure the MOBS 10 to the sea floor 42. The energy expended in this process depends primarily on the local stiffness or density of the sea floor. Each MOBS 10 executes a predetermined coupling and orientation maneuver with fins 14. After coupling itself to the sea floor, the MOBS 10 utilizes its fins to fine tune its attitude so as to level itself with respect to the desired reference horizontal plane relative all other MOBS 10 and the surface support vessel. During this fine tuning stage, controlled oscillation of the fins may also be used to perform an in situ calibration of the coupling response of the sensor package. Each MOBS then sends a message to the surface support vessel indicating that it is ready to record seismic information and remains inactive in a listening mode until an instruction to record is sent from the vessel to become active and record seismic activity.

While a preferred embodiment is shown propelled by fins, any method of propulsion and direction control is acceptable. Alternate propulsion and direction means include but are not limited to transverse mounted propellers located near the center of the

MOBS body, transverse mounted propellers having 180 degree rotating mounts about the horizontal and vertical plane respectively and located near the center of the MOBS body, a propeller located near the center of the MOBS having 180 degree rotating mounts about the horizontal and vertical planes, and/or including directional guidance fins. Other means for propulsion are also acceptable.

Turning now to **Figures 5** and **6**, the operation of the preferred MOBS fins **14** is shown. **Figure 5** illustrates side to side motion of a fin **14**, back and forth along axes **65** and **66**. Fin **14** can also rotate clockwise along arc **60** and counterclockwise along **61**. Fin **14** is attached to MOBS body **10** at point **54** by a flexible fitting which enables vertical and horizontal motion of the fin as well as rotation. As shown in **Figure 6**, fin **14** can also move up and down along arc **63** and **64**.

When swimming, the MOBS **10** rotates fins **14** parallel to the direction of travel and moves the fins **14** forward so that they cut through the water with minimum resistance. Once the fins are moved forward the MOBS rotates the fins so that the fins are perpendicular to the direction of travel and move backward in a swimming stroke motion generating maximum resistance against the water and maximum forward thrust. The speed of the back ward stroke and degree of orientation off horizontal to controll thrust is determined by the navigation and control system. This stroke cycle is repeated to propel the MOBS to its desired location.

The buoyancy of each MOBS can be controlled by taking on or expelling water from buoyancy adjustment tank 41. Buoyancy may be varied to adjust to condition of the water column. In deeper water or strong current, it may be desirable to take on water to make the MOBS heavier and less buoyant to lessen drift. A lighter more buoyant MOBS may desired for shallow water and the buoyancy unit will expel water to make the MOBS more buoyant.

At the end of a source airgun firing sequence or seismic data acquisition and survey, the deployed MOBS instruments may either swim to relocate to a new seismic recording location or they may return to a specified collection location at or near the sea surface for retrieval by the surface support vessel. The surface support vessel instructs each MOBS to detach itself from the sea floor and relocate to a new survey area or to the surface for retrieval. MOBS detachment from the sea floor is achieved by the relative motions of the coupling units or fins, which subsequently transform back to propulsion units for the upward journey as the MOBS swims through the water column to a new survey or to the surface for retrieval. The MOBS navigation technique is the same when returning to the surface or traveling to a new survey area. Once the MOBS instruments arrive at the surface collection point they can be raised to the back deck of the surface support ship and the seismic data may be transferred to storage before retrieval of data for post data acquisition processing. Data retrieval can be performed on the ship or at a remote location. Data can be stored on disk, tape, ROM or transmitted via telemetry, microwave or satellite link.

The foregoing description is intended as an example of a preferred embodiment and not intended to limit the scope of the invention, which is defined by the following claims.

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